

CAPITOL CONNECTION

For Friends and Employees
of the VA Capitol Health
Care Network

VA Capitol
Health Care
Network
VISN 5

Martinsburg VA Medical Center • Washington DC VA Medical Center • VA Maryland Health Care System

VISN 5 Employees Support Hurricane Relief Efforts

During my tenure as Network Director for VISN 5, it has been my pleasure to witness many acts of kindness. None have been more heartwarming than the recent outpouring of support provided by staff throughout the VA Capitol Health Care Network who came together to assist the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The following stories highlight the outstanding and selfless contributions made by dedicated VA employees throughout VISN 5 as a part of the relief efforts. I know you will be as proud as I am of the dedication and commitment demonstrated by our Network employees in serving veterans, fellow VA employees and community members who were impacted by these devastating natural disasters.

VA Maryland Health Care System Support

As most of us were celebrating the Labor Day Holiday this past September, a group of VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS) employees were busy preparing to deploy to the Gulf Coast to serve as part of the relief efforts following Hurricane Katrina. Five VAMHCS clinical staff members and two motor vehicle operators volunteered to travel to the Jackson VA Medical Center in Mississippi to provide medical support to the victims of the hurricane. They deployed with the VAMHCS mobile clinic and one support vehicle to serve veterans, their families and local community members who were in need of medical assistance following the hurricane. To prepare for their deployment to the Gulf Coast, the

staff spent the Labor Day holiday equipping the mobile clinic with much needed medical supplies and medications so they would be ready to immediately start providing medical care upon their arrival in Mississippi. The following VAMHCS employees were part of the original deployment support team: Dr. Benjamin Yorkoff; Harry Aponte, RN; Kathy Thomas, RN; Tracy

Franks, RN; Mike Holy, RN; William Little; and Kevin Hill.

After two weeks of working long hours and treating hundreds of individuals who were impacted by the hurricane, several members of the VAMHCS support team returned to Maryland and were relieved by the following staff members, who also volunteered to assist with the relief efforts: Felicia Anderson, RN; Judy Rogde, RN; Mary Sessions, RN; and Suzanne Herbert, RN.

Chris Buser, MSW, the VAMHCS Seamless Transition Coordinator, traveled to Houston,

Texas, and spent two weeks providing social work services to displaced veterans and their family members who were evacuated to the Houston VA Medical Center as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Other VAMHCS employees offered their services in support of the hurricane relief efforts a little closer to home. The following VAMHCS nurses spent two days assisting the veterans who were evacuated from the Gulfport Armed Forces Retirement Home in Gulfport, Mississippi, to



VA Secretary R. James Nicholson (second from left) and Dr. Jonathan B. Perlin, VA's Under Secretary for Health (far right), greet members of the VAMHCS Hurricane Katrina Support Team (from left to right) William Little, Motor Vehicle Operator; Harry Aponte, RN; Mike Holy, RN; and Kathryn Thomas, RN. The support team was greeted by the Secretary and Under Secretary for Health after arriving at the Jackson VA Medical Center in Mississippi along with the VAMHCS mobile clinic, which is pictured in the background.

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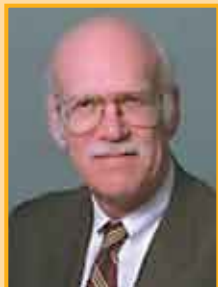
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Employee Education Made Simple



A new tool is now available for use by all VISN 5 employees that will simplify your educational endeavors. The new VISN 5 Education and Training Webpage has been developed to provide Network employees with a central location that furnishes comprehensive information and easy access to both mandatory and

developmental training opportunities that are available at your medical center and across the Network. The webpage can be easily accessed at the following URL address: http://vaww.visn5.med.va.gov/resources/career_dev/training.htm.

Browse the website by clicking on the hot links (lined items) to navigate and learn about the many multifaceted health-related topics and training opportunities. While browsing this site, you will find helpful training programs offered through a variety of learning modalities: didactic classroom sessions conducted by content experts; distance learning and on-line training programs that allow access to training at your convenience; access to the VA Learning Catalog; and topic specific conferences, symposiums and seminars that are held off-site or at your local medical center. Educational listings, program information, career

information and personal development resources are frequently updated, so visit this web-site often. Our goal is to keep you informed about current education and training opportunities that will assist you to reach your educational goals.

Employee development is a cornerstone of the VA Capitol Health Care Network's human resource strategic initiative. Employees are encouraged to become aware of how to improve job competency and skills, in addition to learning about self-development and educational opportunities that will help you reach your highest potential. VISN educational program offerings are dedicated to raising job-related competencies, enhancing operational skills and developing leadership proficiency within the management and staff of our health care system. Ultimately, our health care organization becomes stronger and the quality of care improves through optimum development of the agency's greatest asset – its employees.

Sincerely,

James J. Nocks, MD, MSHA
Director, VA Capitol Health Care Network

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the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington, DC: Nancy Gault, RN; Mel Jacobs, PA-C; Kicha McBee, RN; Sharon McNeil, RN; and Karen Reedy, RN, PA-C.

In addition to providing staff to support with the relief efforts, the VAMHCS also coordinated the collection of donated funds to assist VA patients and employees who lost so much. Donation canisters were placed by every cash register in the Canteen Retail Stores and Cafeterias at the Baltimore and Perry Point VA Medical Centers and the Baltimore VA Rehabilitation & Extended Care Center. Letters were also distributed to all affiliated veterans service organizations throughout the state to solicit their support for the veteran patients who were impacted by Hurricane Katrina. Thanks to the generous contributions of VAMHCS employees and local veterans service organizations, over \$5,000 was raised to assist veterans and VA employees who were impacted by Hurricane Katrina.

VAMHCS employees and affiliated veterans service organizations demonstrated through their actions in response to the hurricane relief efforts that they are committed to supporting the needs of all veterans and VA employees throughout the country – no matter what the cost. Thanks to their efforts and contributions, thousands of veterans, VA employees and local community members were provided with much needed medical and financial assistance during the days and weeks following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Washington DC VA Medical Center Support

The Washington DC VA Medical Center (DCVAMC), the next door neighbor of the Armed Forces Retirement Home (AFRH), prepared to lend its support immediately upon learning of the evacuation of the retirement home's sister center in Gulfport, Mississippi.

The U.S. Naval Home in Gulfport was established in 1812 to serve indigent sailors and Marines. It later merged with the U.S. Soldiers' and Airmen's Home in Washington, DC. Both homes are now known as the Armed Forces Retirement Home and provide affordable independent and assisted living to senior and disabled military retirees.

When the seaside Gulfport Armed Forces Retirement Home was decimated by Hurricane Katrina, the 416 elderly residents hastily tossed their few salvaged belongings in plastic bags and boarded buses for Washington, DC. Their medical records were washed away along with family photos, treasured heirlooms and the place they called home. Along the route, several became ill and were admitted to hospitals during a stop in Atlanta, Georgia. Others made arrangements to meet their loved ones.

On September 1, 2005, 322 exhausted and worried veterans arrived at AFRH. Staff of the DCVAMC was on hand to meet them and begin the enrollment process. Military retirees already receiving VA health care through the VA Gulf Coast Veterans

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Healthcare System had their medications prescribed, filled and delivered to their new rooms within two hours of their clinical visits. Medical records, including images, were available in one to two days. No medical records followed those retirees who had not previously enrolled, but DCVAMC staff registered them quickly, established new electronic records and replaced their medications.

The DCVAMC was able to quickly and effectively support the evacuees in large part due to the availability of electronic records. Fifteen computer workstations were set up at the Armed Forces Retirement Home and within minutes of the arrival of the evacuees, a walk-in clinic was established. To date, nearly 300 military retirees have been registered and have met with a DCVAMC clinician and/or a social worker. Approximately 20 of the Gulfport evacuees were in need of hospitalization.

The medical center's staff of physicians, nurses, social workers, psychologists and enrollment personnel exemplifies VA dedication to outstanding care. They worked tirelessly late into the evenings and on weekends to provide support for this vulnerable and deserving group of veterans.

DCVAMC staff is also visiting the Washington, DC Armory on a regular basis. To date, 36 veterans needing services have been identified. Several have been admitted to the hospital.

From the outset, social workers responded to meet the urgent needs of this vulnerable population. This included identifying individuals needing higher levels of care and moving them to appropriate settings, providing much needed counseling, and assisting with financial concerns; such as getting addresses changed for pension checks. Social workers used their own cell phones to help contact family members and put missing family names on the FEMA website. They took care of getting batteries for hearing aides, helped find missing belongings, and in some cases hand delivered medications to resident rooms.

As days passed, the team began to see increasing mental health needs such as stress, anxiety and panic reactions. Mental Health social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists were deployed. A VA Mental Health Clinic is now operating at the Armed Forces Retirement Home.

Pharmacy Service staff has filled over 1,200 prescriptions to date. And, the entire medical center is participating in a fund raising drive to collect money, clothing, personal care and entertainment items for the residents.

Although veteran survivors of Hurricane Katrina have suffered significant losses, VA is meeting the needs of those now residing in Washington, DC, due, in large part, to the dedicated staff of the DCVAMC.



Deborah Amdur, Special Assistant to the Medical Center Director at the DCVAMC, is pictured assisting a resident who was transferred from the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Gulfport, Mississippi, to the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington, DC, after the facility in Gulfport was decimated by Hurricane Katrina.

Martinsburg VA Medical Center Support

Staff from the Martinsburg VA Medical Center (VAMC) pulled together this past Labor Day as they departed for the Jackson VA Medical Center in Mississippi to help with the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts. Dr. Mark Meany, an Emergency Room physician, along with several VA nurses, teamed up with two Washington DC VA Medical Center staff to drive a bus and van filled with much needed supplies to the Gulf Coast. The nursing volunteers included Elaine Renner, RN, Marsha Martin, LPN, and Evelyn Meany. The following Martinsburg VAMC employees also volunteered to deploy to various areas throughout the Gulf Coast to assist with relief efforts following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita: Lee Rollison, FMS; Sylvester Smith, FMS; Caroline Slaughter, Nursing; Carolyn Schultz, Pharmacy; Robby Jo Barton, Nursing; Dana Clark, Nursing; Jeremy Pennington, Police; Stephanie O'Connor, PM&RS; Chris Clanton, FMS; and Bill "Skeeter" Rockwell, FMS.

During the months of September and October 2005, Martinsburg VAMC employees contributed nearly \$800 to the victims of Hurricane Katrina through collection sites in the Canteen Retail Store and Cafeteria. During the holidays, the staff at Martinsburg turned their thoughts and efforts to the needs of the hurricane victims by organizing a "Silent Auction" in conjunction with the Employees Association to benefit VA patients and employees who were impacted by the hurricane. Employees were very generous and clever with their selection of items and services for sale as a part of the "Silent Auction," which successfully raised approximately \$4,400 for the Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund.

The employees at the Martinsburg VAMC are continuing with their outreach to the victims of Hurricane Katrina by sponsoring a quilt project. A committee has designed and cut out a quilt, and squares are being offered for a \$10 donation. The squares can be signed in memory or honor of a loved one or just as a donation. The proceeds from the quilt squares will be forwarded to the Hurricane Katrina Relief Fund, and the completed quilt will be sent to one of the VA medical centers that was severely affected by the hurricane.

By Dr. James J. Nocks

The combined Hurricane Katrina Medical Support Team from the Martinsburg VAMC and the DCVAMC included (from left to right) Mike Gray, driver, DCVAMC; Elaine Renner, RN, Martinsburg VAMC; Rodney Johnson, driver, DCVAMC; Marsha Martin, LPN, Martinsburg VAMC; Mark Meany, MD, Martinsburg VAMC; and Evelyn Meany, wife of Dr. Meany, who are pictured in front of their mobile clinic prior to departing for the Jackson VA Medical Center in Mississippi.



VA Prescription Co-Pays Increase by \$1

Co-payments for a 30-day supply of outpatient medicines prescribed through VA medical facilities increased by \$1 on January 1, 2006, which is the first change in VA prescription drug co-payments in four years. "Through sound management practices, efficient pharmacy operations and price negotiations that put veterans first, VA has been able to contain prescription drug costs," said R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, noting that co-payments paid by veterans will still be lower than similar expenses in the private sector.

The increase to \$8 from \$7 for a 30-day supply of prescription drugs is required by federal law, which bases VA's co-payments for outpatient prescriptions on increases in the Medical Consumer Price Index. The \$1 increase will not affect veterans who have an injury or illness connected with their military service resulting in a 50 percent or greater disability. Also known as "Priority Group 1" veterans, these patients will see no change in their current prescription drug benefit, Nicholson said.

Other veterans with less pronounced service-connected ailments – those classified as Priority Groups 2 through 6 – will see their prescription drug co-pays rise by \$1, but their annual out-of-pocket expenses for VA medicine will remain capped. The new cap will rise to \$960 per year, up \$120 from

the previous level. This means veterans in Priority Groups 2 through 6 will pay no more than \$960 annually for VA outpatient medicine.

Veterans who have no injury or illness related in any way to their prior military service – referred to as Priority Groups 7 and 8 – will also see their co-payments increase, but there is no cap on annual payments for outpatient medicine.

Not all prescription drugs will be subject to the \$1 increase. Outpatient medications not subject to co-payments include:

- Medication for treatment of a service-connected disability;
- Medication for a veteran who has a service-connected disability of 50 percent or more;
- Medication for a veteran disabled by 50 percent or more for unemployability;
- Medication for a veteran whose annual income does not exceed the amount of VA pensions;
- Medications for health problems that may be linked to Agent Orange for Vietnam veterans, to radiation exposure, to undiagnosed illnesses of Persian War veterans, or for new veterans within two years of discharge after serving in a combat theater.

VA Commits New Funding for Increased Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses Research Funding

In an effort to further answer medical questions involving veterans who served in the Gulf War, VA has approved funding for 12 new research projects to better understand the illnesses affecting some Gulf War veterans.

The total cost of the research projects, all of which went through a rigorous medical peer review, is estimated to be \$5.2 million over three years, with \$1.7 million approved for Fiscal Year 2006. The new programs bring projected Gulf War veterans' illnesses research spending for FY 2006 to \$11.3 million.

Funding for the projects began in January 2006, and all research is being conducted at VA medical centers around the country, including the Washington, DC, and Baltimore VA Medical Centers (VAMC).

VA approved funding for three separate research programs at the Washington, DC

VAMC. In the first project, initial funding of \$87,000 will pay for the first year of a two-year pilot program to compare the nervous systems of healthy Gulf War veterans with those suffering from dizziness, blurred vision, tremors and excessive fatigue. A second two-year pilot at the Washington, DC VAMC will study whether Gulf War veterans with undiagnosed muscle and joint pain and other symptoms have experienced specific nerve cell damage or loss. The project will receive \$86,000 in first-year funding. The Washington, DC VAMC will also receive \$86,000 for a year-long study of Gulf War veterans receiving disability compensation for undiagnosed illness to determine whether the compensation has any effect on their use of VA medical services.

The Baltimore VAMC was approved for funding for a two-year research program.

Initial funding of \$84,000 will pay for the first year of a pilot program to test the effects of prolonged stress on the body's ability to respond to future stress, infection and injury.

Some veterans who participated in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm have reported a variety of ailments including fatigue, weakness, sleep disturbances, persistent headaches, skin rashes, respiratory problems, and other illnesses at rates that significantly exceed those reported by other veteran groups. The research projects that will be conducted will focus on understanding and treating the illnesses affecting these veterans, as well as understanding the potential long-term health effects of Gulf War-related exposures.

"VA will continue to address the unique health care needs of our Gulf War veterans," said R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "This research should lead to better healthcare for veterans suffering from a variety of conditions."

MARTINSBURG VA MEDICAL CENTER HAPPENINGS

Martinsburg VAMC Successfully Withstands Numerous Accreditation Reviews

During the past year, the Martinsburg VA Medical Center (VAMC) successfully made it through the following accreditation surveys:

- The facility received full accreditation from the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) in September 2005. The five-member survey team was generally very complimentary of Martinsburg and the genuine concern and dedication that was evident from all staff members. The Survey Leader praised the facility for providing good patient care and commented on the fact that all six Community Based Outpatient Clinics were surveyed, and there were no Recommendations for Improvement (RFIs).
 - The Laboratory received full accreditation from the College of American Pathologists (CAP) in October 2005. The CAP Program is the most
- respected and recognized laboratory accreditation program and has been considered the “gold standard” against which others are measured. Participation in the CAP Program requires adherence to the most stringent requirements in Laboratory accreditation.
- Prosthetics & Sensory Aids Service received full accreditation from the Board for Orthotist/Prosthetist Certification earlier in 2005.
 - The Compensated Work Therapy Program and Veterans Industries Program received re-accreditation by CARF surveyors in February 2005. CARF (Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities) conducts surveys every three years, and they specialize in surveying vocational and residential programs of behavioral health services.

By Barbara Corbin

Martinsburg VAMC Celebrates VA's 75th Anniversary

As part of the Martinsburg VAMC's celebration of VA's 75th Anniversary, a unique program has been established to also help recognize employees for outstanding customer service throughout the medical center. Silver VA 75th Anniversary tokens are being distributed by the Quadrad to employees they witness demonstrating “acts of kindness” throughout the facility.



This unique initiative is allowing the Martinsburg VAMC to recognize VA's 75th Anniversary celebration throughout the year, while also acknowledging employees for their outstanding acts of customer service.

By Barbara Corbin

Information Technology (IT) Café Conference

Staff at the Martinsburg VAMC realized a need for employee training... training to focus on improvement of analytical and data mining skills and the use of technology tools. This training is central to the goal of improving the business culture within the medical center.

The IT Café concept was designed after the Information Technology Conference in Austin, Texas. Debora Gantt, Chief of Information Management Service

at the Martinsburg VAMC, solicited the help of Mary Heinen, Chief, Clinical Informatics, and Mary Ann Creel, Chief, Vista Support, and the design process began. Staff transformed the beautiful 175-acre facility and its 45 buildings into a college campus atmosphere. The facilitators set up the three-day, campus-style training for November 8-10, 2005. They utilized multiple computer classrooms, conference rooms and instructors to offer 17 different course topics for a total of 30 sessions. This provided 948 educational hours for 174 employees.

Costs for the conference equated to \$30.96 per person or \$5.68 per educational hour, but the benefits are ‘priceless.’ The courses were offered at

various skill levels...beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Dr. Harry Pigman, VISN 16 Data Warehouse, and Deborah Wheeler, Veterans Support Service Center, were two guest instructors who provided excellent information on performance improvement and Proclarity respectively. Some of the class selections included...Access, Proclarity, Decision Support System (DSS) presentations, Basic Excel, QI Macros Excel, Power Point, Fileman, and Web Resources.

The IT Café opening session on November 8, 2005 was filled to capacity, and comments from facility leaders, beginning with Medical Center Director Fernando Rivera, sparked enthusiasm from the beginning. The room seemed to vibrate as employees applauded the concept and showed a genuine excitement about the training opportunities.

By Barbara Corbin



A group of Martinsburg VAMC employees is pictured during one of the 30 different classes that were offered at the medical center during the IT Café Conference.

Brian A. Hawkins Appointed as New Associate Director for Finance for VA Maryland Health Care System



Brian A. Hawkins has been appointed as the new Associate Director for Finance for the VA Maryland Health Care System (VAMHCS). Hawkins served as the Chief of the Business Office for the VA Tennessee Valley Health Care System prior to assuming the duties of his current position.

In his capacity as the Associate Director for Finance, Hawkins is responsible for the health care system's yearly budget of approximately \$350 million. Additionally, he oversees the day-to-day operations of Finance and Accounting, Human Resources Management, Canteen and Medical Administration Services, as well as the Medical Cost Collection Fund and Decision Support Systems Offices for the VAMHCS. Hawkins also serves as the site manager for the Perry Point VA Medical Center and is responsible for resource management and strategic planning for the health care system.

By Margaret Hornberger

Anklebot Used to Aid Stroke Survivors at Baltimore VAMC

Robots are used for just about anything imaginable these days: from assembling cars to motorizing wheelchairs. Now with the invention of the "Anklebot," stroke survivors who participate in research studies at the Baltimore VA Medical Center (VAMC) will discover whether robots can improve walking in individuals with paralysis.

The Anklebot, which was developed by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), marks a significant advancement in robotics to "help teach" paralyzed legs to move more effectively. Already in operation at the Baltimore VAMC is the "MIT-Manus" robot, which has proven in clinical trials to help stroke patients regain movement of their arms.

During therapy, a stroke sufferer sits at a table with the lower arm in a brace attached to the arm of the robot. A video screen prompts the patient to perform arm exercises such as connecting a series of dots or drawing hands on a clock. If movement does not occur, the robot is programmed to move the person's arm. If the patient initiates movement, the robot provides adjustable levels of guidance and assistance to facilitate the person's arm movement.

Just like the MIT-Manus, Anklebot is a "movement computer" that can be programmed in the same way, but targets training of the paralyzed ankle. After repeated treatment, researchers expect patients to notice improved balance, as well as walking function.

By Monica A. Smith

New State-of-the-Art Reading Room Expected to Enhance Filmless Radiology Capacity at Baltimore VA Medical Center

It has been more than a decade since the Baltimore VA Medical Center (VAMC) became the first VA health care facility in the world to make the transition to filmless radiology. While the 1993 changeover to a Picture Archiving and Communications System (PACS) was a boon to the hospital, little consideration was given at the time to creating an optimal workspace to read and evaluate images. That is about to change as the Baltimore VAMC prepares to mark the opening of its brand new, state-of-the-art radiology reading room in early 2006.

"We've learned a lot of lessons over the years," explains Dr. Eliot Siegel, Chief of Radiology and Nuclear Medicine for the VA Maryland Health Care System. "Through extensive research and expert consultation, we have created a functional redesign of our former reading space into the radiology reading room of the future."

The new radiology reading room occupies a centralized location, where consolidated

workstation design - moving from a four-monitor to a two-monitor workstation layout - and improved lighting and sound will create a comfortable environment for radiologists to work and collaborate. In addition to individualized lighting and temperature controls intended to reduce eyestrain and other environmental stressors, the room will rely on the integration of information systems and improved workstation ergonomics to create a functional soft-copy reading environment that serves as part-research center, part-clinical working environment.

Improved environmental controls impact not only the comfort level in the workplace environment, but also the performance and overall efficiency of the Radiology and Imaging Department. "Our plans for the new, redesigned reading room include not only better individual control of local and general lighting, but also individual ventilation controls," said Dr. Siegel.

Designed as a living, breathing showcase for filmless radiology imaging and interpretation, the new reading room is intended to streamline the procedures and processes that impact the treatment flow and patient throughput. Moreover, it will enable radiologists to work as independently of distraction as possible, while at the same time encouraging collaboration with clinicians working both within and outside the radiology unit.

"Overall, this new reading environment will enhance the performance, accuracy, and productivity of radiologists," said Dr. Siegel.

The re-design of the Baltimore VAMC's radiology reading room coincides with the Radiology and Imaging Department's acquisition of a second MRI scanner and was made possible in part by a grant from GE Medical Systems.

By Leslie Lichtenberg

WASHINGTON DC VA MEDICAL CENTER HAPPENINGS

A Week to Honor Veterans: Washington DC VAMC Celebrates Veterans Day 2005 and VA's 75th Anniversary

On Monday, November 7, 2005, the Washington DC VA Medical Center (DCVAMC) kicked-off a week of festivities honoring veterans and recognizing the 75th Anniversary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The activities ranged from a formal program with speakers from Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF - Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), to full days of spirited entertainment by fellow employees and professional performers.

The Opening Ceremony highlighted the talents of the USO Liberty Belles. Displays of veterans' art and military memorabilia were stationed in the medical center's atrium and a video station presented war-era documentaries throughout the week.

On Tuesday, a VA Movie Marathon, complete with uniformed movie escorts, popcorn and candy, was on the agenda. Award-winning VA films such as *Our Turn to Serve* and *Affirming the Commitment* were presented.

Wednesday, November 9, brought musical merriment offered by veterans, employees and professional performers.

Thursday's formal program, emceed by Medical Center Director Sanford M. Garfunkel, included a truly heartwarming presentation

by keynote speaker, Robert Frame, DDS, Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Dentistry. Dr. Frame is a veteran of both OEF and OIF.

On Friday, November 11, several DCVAMC staff members participated in a "call-in" TV news special on local CBS affiliate, WUSA - Channel 9, which provided helpful information to area veterans on health care and benefits.

By Michelle Spivak



The guest of honor at the culminating event of the week of activities at the DCVAMC was Joseph "Jay" Briseno, Jr. Jay, the most seriously wounded soldier to return from Iraq, is lovingly cared for by the staff at the DCVAMC. Pictured at the DCVAMC 75th Anniversary celebration is Jay, center with (from left to right) Dr. Ross Fletcher, Chief of Staff; Eva Briseno, Jay's mother; Joseph Briseno, Sr., Jay's father and a guest speaker; and Sanford Garfunkel, Medical Center Director.

Measuring Up: DCVAMC's Face-to-Face Surveys to Improve Patient Satisfaction

Measuring patient satisfaction is an increasing priority in health care today. The Washington DC VA Medical Center (DCVAMC) continually seeks new ways to provide more efficient service, increased clinic access and better quality health care for the veterans it serves.

VA uses the national Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patients (SHEP) measurement tool to gauge patient satisfaction. The DCVAMC also uses numerous resources to measure patient satisfaction at the local level. These include the familiar "Quick Card" surveys that are distributed throughout the

medical center for veterans to complete. Since April 2005, the Patient Advocate Office has also been collecting data via a daily inpatient quality of care survey. This is a face-to-face survey program.

Approximately one quarter of our inpatients are visited daily by a patient advocate. Patient advocates ask patients questions related to general health care issues that are known to be of concern to patients. Our goal is not only to identify patient problems, but also to anticipate potential problems and discuss issues before they become complaints.

It is through these daily visits that patients air both their concerns and their compliments. These concerns are turned into a numerical patient satisfaction score, and trended over time to show improvement or a decline in services. This information is forwarded to the clinical departments each morning so that immediate action may be taken.

Veteran Howard A. Craig is pleased with the opportunity to give feedback on his experience as a patient at the DCVAMC to Karen L. Taylor, Patient Advocate.

By providing a daily satisfaction score to our health care providers, they are able to see that what they do has a direct impact on patients' experiences in our medical center.

Daily satisfaction scores also help staff rate the success of our numerous processes. Measuring a process helps us to know where a breakdown occurs and to correct the procedure.

Since April 2005, the daily surveys have shown that one of the areas we have improved upon is emotional support.

Inpatient satisfaction within the "overall quality" category has also improved at the DCVAMC from 58.7% in March 2005 to 82.5% in October 2005. Everyday, we ask our veteran patients, "...if you could have free care outside the VA, would you still choose to be hospitalized here again?" Eighty-three percent of our patients have responded "Yes." Veterans understand that when they come to the DCVAMC, they are coming for more than just health care. They come to a facility that takes pride in its important role - caring for those who served our Nation.

By Bill Sivley



MyHealtheVet Introduces Online Prescription Refill Service

Tens of thousands of veterans are now receiving their prescription drug refills from VA with greater convenience, speed and security, thanks to a new service available to veterans over the Internet.

More than 70,000 prescriptions have been refilled using the latest service added to VA's "MyHealtheVet," the personal online health record system designed for veterans in the VA health care system. The prescription refill service began on August 31, 2005.

"VA's MyHealtheVet prescription refill service is proving to be extremely successful in providing America's veterans with fast, easy

and secure access to their important medications," said R. James Nicholson, Secretary of Veterans Affairs. "Given the

overwhelmingly positive response VA has received to this initiative from our veterans, we anticipate that thousands more veterans will choose to take advantage of this convenient service."

The secure online prescription refill service has quickly emerged as one of the more popular features in the MyHealtheVet system, which connects with VA's widely respected electronic records system. When a veteran orders a prescription refill, the request is routed to VA's computer system to be filled by one of the department's outpatient mail pharmacies. The refill is then sent directly to the veteran, eliminating the need for a trip to the pharmacy and a wait in line.

On Veterans Day, November 11, 2005, MyHealtheVet marked its second anniversary by adding three new health records that veterans can keep in a secure electronic environment and make available to VA health professionals nationwide – blood oxygen levels taken from a pulse oximeter, daily food intake in the Food Journal, and physical activity and exercise in the Activity Journal.

By October 2005, more than 100,000 veterans had signed up to use MyHealtheVet, which is located on VA's Web site at www.myhealth.va.gov. Among the services available to veterans, their families and VA care providers through the online personal record are the ability to track health conditions – entering readings such as blood pressure and cholesterol levels – and to record medications, allergies, military health history, medical events and tests.

Veterans can also include personal information, such as emergency contacts, names of medical providers and health insurance information. They can access health information on the Internet from VA, MedlinePlus from the National Library of Medicine, and Healthwise, a commercial health education library.

Future expansion of MyHealtheVet will allow VA patients to view appointments and co-payment balances, access portions of their medical records, and give access to their records to doctors, family members and others.



Eight for Excellence

Honoring veterans with exceptional health care that extends beyond medical treatment but also focuses on the individual well being of veterans is exactly what the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) wants its employees to do.

VHA's new mission statement, unveiled in October 2005, is as follows: Honor America's veterans by providing exceptional health care that improves their health and well being!

Besides living by VHA's new mission and vision statements, Under Secretary for Health Dr. Jonathan B. Perlin hopes the administration's more than 190,000 employees will emulate VHA's five core values of trust, respect, excellence, compassion and commitment in everything they do.

VHA's senior leadership has also developed eight strategies known as Eight for Excellence to serve as a compass to guide VHA in the next year.

The organization's overall goal is to provide employees with a guide to achieving and maintaining exceptional health care to veterans and

their families in a timely manner that not only improves their health but also improves their well being.

"Inspired by all that has come before, we have developed a new vision to guide our future," said Dr. Perlin. "We have affirmed our core values and our domains of value, which have served us well along our journey of change. And, now we have eight new planning strategies for improvement - each of which will help us enhance our leadership in health care and meet the challenges the future holds in store for us."

Dr. Perlin believes the new mission and vision statements, core values and eight strategies will be a recipe for success for VHA today and tomorrow.

"For me, the key word in all of this is 'exceptional,'" Dr. Perlin said. "It is not enough for us to be recognized for being good at what we do. We must be better than good, better than even great. We must be exceptional."



Dr. Jonathan B. Perlin, VA's Under Secretary for Health

Editorial Box

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